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Flowers. A Chapter in “The Book of Tea” by Okakura-Kakuzo.



“THE BOOK OF TEA,” by Okakura-Kakuzo and published by Duffield & Company, initiates the reader into the mysteries of the tea ceremony in Japan, where, by the elect, tea drinking is considered not merely an entertainment but a rite.

The arrangement of flowers in the tea-room by the tea-master is an important incident; wherefore the author devotes one of his most delightful chapters to flowers.

He asks if you have not felt, when the birds were whispering in mysterious cadence among the trees in the trembling grey of a spring dawn, that they were talking to their mates about the flowers; then argues that primeval man in offering the first garland to his maiden, thereby transcended the brute and became human by rising above the crude necessities of nature. Indeed, he entered the realm of art by thus perceiving the subtle use of the useless. Yet

THE our boast that we have conquered matter he holds to
LOTUS be vain. Is it not rather that matter has enslaved
us? And what atrocities do we not perpetrate in the
name of culture and refinement?

“Tell me, gentle flowers,” he asks, “teardrops of the stars, standing in the garden, nodding your heads to the bees as they sing of the dews and the sunbeams, are you aware of the fearful doom that awaits you? Dream on, sway and frolic while you may in the gentle breezes of summer. Tomorrow a ruthless hand will close around your throats. You will be wrenched, torn asunder limb by limb, and borne away from your quiet homes. The wretch, she may be passing fair. She may say how lovely you are while her fingers are still moist with your blood. Tell me, will this be kindness? It may be your fate to be imprisoned in the hair of one whom you know to be heartless or to be thrust into the button-hole of one who would not dare to look you in the face were you a man. It may even be your lot to be confined in some narrow vessel with only stagnant water to quench the maddening thirst that warns of ebbing life.”

And the waste of flowers! Their number, cut

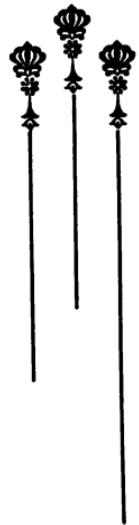
daily to adorn the ballrooms and banquet-tables of Europe and America, to be thrown away on the morrow, must, he thinks, be something enormous; and adds that, were they strung together, they might garland a continent. Poor flowers! They were born beautiful, but helpless. He points out that insects can sting, and even the meekest of beasts fight when brought to bay. Birds whose feathers are sought to deck the headgear of fashion, have at least a chance of escape in that they can fly from their pursuers; and furred animals can hide in their burrows. "Alas! The only flower known to have wings is the butterfly; all others stand helpless before the destroyer." Do they give a cry of anguish in their death agony? If so, our hardened ears are deaf to it. "We are ever brutal to those who love and serve us in silence, but the time may come when, for our cruelty, we shall be deserted by these best friends of ours. Have you not noticed that the wild flowers are becoming scarcer every year? It may be that their wise men have told them to depart till man becomes more human. Perhaps they have migrated to heaven."

Okakura tells us that in the East the art of flori-

THE culture is an ancient one; that story and song record
LOTUS the loves of poets and their favorite plants; that with
the development of ceramic art in the Tang and Sung
dynasties, wonderful receptacles were made to hold
plants, not mere pots, but rather jewelled palaces.
He gives delightful details of the honor in which
flowers were held, such as that a special attendant
was assigned to wait upon each flower and to wash
its leaves with soft brushes made of rabbit hair;
while it was provided that the peony should be
bathed by a handsome maiden in ceremonial costume
and a winter plum watered by a pale, slender monk.
As a precaution for the preservation of delicate blos-
soms, Emperor Huensung, of the Tang dynasty, hung
tiny golden bells on the branches in his garden to
keep off the birds; and it was he who, in the spring-
time, went off with his court musicians to gladden
the flowers with soft music.

We read in "The Book of Tea" that when a
tea-master has arranged a flower to his satisfaction
he will place it on the tokonoma, the place of honor
in a Japanese room; that nothing else will be placed
near it which might interfere with its effect, not even

a painting, unless there be some special aesthetic reason for the combination. It rests there like an enthroned prince, and the guests or disciples on entering the room will salute it with a profound bow before making their addresses to the host. Nor does the honor paid the flower end there. When it fades, the master tenderly consigns it to the river or carefully buries it in the ground. Monuments even are sometimes erected to the memory of flowers.



A little further the author tells us that the tea-master deems his duty ended with the selection of the flowers, leaving them to tell their own story. Thus, however, he achieves some of his unique effects. If in a tea-room in late winter you see a slender spray of wild cherries in combination with a budding camellia, it is an echo of departing winter coupled with the prophecy of spring. Again, if you go into a noon-tea on some irritatingly hot summer day, you may discover in the darkened coolness of the tokonoma a single lily in a hanging vase. Dripping with dew, it seems to smile at the foolishness of life.

Okakura considers a solo of flowers interesting, but finds the combination entrancing in a concerto with painting and sculpture. "Sekishiu

THE LOTUS once placed some water-plants in a flat receptacle to suggest the vegetation of lakes and marshes, and on the wall above he hung a painting by Soami of wild ducks flying in the air. Shoha, another tea-master, combined a poem on the Beauty of Solitude by the Sea with a bronze incense burner in the form of a fisherman's hut and some wild flowers of the beach. One of the guests has recorded that he felt in the whole composition the breath of waning autumn."

In the sixteenth century the morning-glory was as yet a rare plant in Japan. Rikiu, a famous tea-master, had an entire garden planted with it and cultivated it with assiduous care. The fame of his morning-glories reaching the ear of the Taiko, he expressed a desire to see them, and Rikiu invited him to a morning tea at his house. The result is graphically recounted by Okakura. On the appointed day Taiko walked through the garden, but nowhere could he see a vestige of morning-glory. The ground had been leveled and strewn with fine pebbles and sand. Sullen and in anger the despot stalked into the tea-room. But there a sight awaited him which changed

his anger into ecstasy. On the tokonoma, in a rare bronze of Sung workmanship, lay a single morning-glory—the queen of the whole garden!

"In such instances we see the full significance of the Flower Sacrifice. Perhaps the flowers appreciate the full significance of it. They are not cowards, like men. Some flowers glory in death—certainly the Japanese cherry blossoms do, as they freely surrender themselves to the winds. Any one who has stood before the fragrant avalanche at Yoshino or Arashiyama must have realized this. For a moment they hover like bejewelled clouds and dance above the crystal streams; then, as they sail away on the laughing waters, they seem to say: "Farewell, O Spring! We are on to Eternity."

Reviewers often call the attention of their readers to new books which they should secure. "The Book of Tea" is not new, but its charm will prevent its becoming old. It is a small volume full of the subtle fragrance of the steeped herb. Lotus readers should secure it. It is quite too delicate for them not to regret missing it.